

## [Circus People]

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Terry Roth

ADDRESS 47 W. 69th St.

DATE January 17, 1939

SUBJECT "CIRCUS PEOPLE IS LIKE OTHER HUMAN BEIN'S."

1. Ancestry Irish

2. Place and date of birth

Buffalo, 1896

3. Family

No children

4. Place lived in with dates

trouped all over country

5. Education, with dates

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not given

### 6. Occupation and accomplishments, with dates

Wire trapeze performer

### 7. Special skills and interests

Gardening

### 8. Community and religious activities

Not given

### 9. Description of informant

Informant is 42 years old although she appears to be a bit older. Her hair is bleached a straw color and the singed ends tell of many careless attempts to put a curl into what normally is straight course hair. Has blue eyes, very heavily mascaraed; make up is very vulgar, with red circles on the checks, such as one finds on Russian dolls. Lipstick is smeared on unevenly which gives her a grotesque mouth. She stands about 5 feet 3 inches in height, and weighs about

10. Other Points gained in interview 133 pounds. I found her very friendly and a trifle uneasy at first. She made several attempts to enunciate carefully, and tried in the beginning to give the impression that she was exceedingly cultured, but as the story went on she forgot herself and spoke more naturally. Her husband was playing cards in the club room and couldn't leave the game to see me. duplicate

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NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

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### FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Terry Roth

ADDRESS 47 W. 69th St. New York

DATE January 17, 1939

SUBJECT "CIRCUS PEOPLE IS LIKE OTHER HUMAN BEIN'S".

1. Date and time of interview Jan. 16th
2. Place of interview Office of Nat'l Variety Artists
3. Name and address of informant

Maude Cromwell Long Island

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

N. V. A.

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

Described previously in Chiny Money Vans.

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NEW YORK

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Terry Roth

ADDRESS 47 W. 69th St.

DATE January 17, 1939

SUBJECT CIRCUS PEOPLE IS LIKE OTHER HUMAN BEIN'S."

"How I started was I met my husband in Buffalo at a Concert Hall. He was doing a wire act and we wuz married six months after. In these six months time we went out to do our first act. It was in Canada, I guess it felt kinda strange doin' a double trapeze act the first time, see, I was never in front of an audience before, but I guess havin' my husband there fixed me up, 'cause I can't say I was nervous, I wusn't scared, anyway. We got to workin' with fairs until in 1912 we joined Ringling Bros. Circus. We wuz with the Circus 12 years until 1926. That's when we had our accident. In the meantime me worked vaudeville. I had nine falls and still lived. Then my husband and me fell 40 feet twice with Ringling. You know, before we went up we would examine our stuff very carefully. We won't let nobody do it for us. But the trouble in when you buy new parts or hooks, or somethin'; it looks perfect but somethin' is defected so you can't tell when you look the act over before you go up. In the meantime, while I wuz at the Circus, I worked with Madam Leitzer, who was one of the greatest women performers that ever lived.

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In 1926 my husband and me both fell with the Circus in Chicago in which we laid nine weeks in the hospital and it took one month before we were troupin'. Then we worked Fairs and Parks. And we done a couple shorts for the movies, like we wuz in Glorifying the American Girl.

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Now we have a home in Long Island. We have flowers, we both loves flowers, and in the summer we have a trapeze in the back yard and we go through our acts and keep in shape.

Would you like me to tell you somethin' about circus life? In the circus there's a dressin' tent and everybody has their own trunks. When you come down to the lot your trunk sets in that same place every day. We all have our two buckets for to wash in. Some of the women make a little extra change, like with ions, you know, gasoline ions, one rents out for 25 cents an hour. Another woman has finger wavin' the hair for fifty cents. Another does washin' clothes, 10 cents apiece for the clothes. Most of the performers has silk tights which has to be washed just so, they cost 15 and 16 dollars a pair and you gotta be careful they dont shrink. So you might wash them yourselves but generally the woman what does the washin', she knows all about them and takes good care, so she does them.

There are so many things people doesn't know, that people on the outside dont realize how circus people live. They think that circus people are just livin' in box cars. If they wuz to go down to the cars at night and see how their berths are like a stateroom, why it takes 12 yards of cretonne to cover a berth. And then you bring with you your little things personal to fix it up. Every berth has their little ice water tanks and little cabinets which are made by a man in the circus. He sells them to the performers for six dollars each. Every year he takes them back to winter quarters and puts their names on each tank and each cabinet and every year when the show opens again they will find this cabinet and tank in their berth in their cars. Another thing, circus 3 people all have box mattresses, cotin' sight to ten dollars each and sometime more. Also, the berths have electric inside from batteries that's in each car, and we have a privilege car which is like a club car. As far as eatin', we eat on the lot, family style. But at night, say if you want a sandwich or a cup of tea, you make it up in your own berth in the cars. Everybody goes home in the winter when the show goes to winter quarters. Some has their homes in Sarasota and goes with

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the circus down there. Others just go here and there, everywhere. We meet at Madison Square garden when the show opens again.

We do the longest Breakaway in any double trapeze act alive. He holds me by the fingers like this and I swing high. I'm hangin' in my hooks; after the fourth swing, he swings loose from one finger and sends me out into the audience for a 40 foot drop. At the end of the drop I scream and it terrifies the audience, it gets them scared. They all think I'm fallin'. Then I run off and jump into the audience and with a great surprise, I run to the front, stand on the ring curb and make my bow and at that moment the audience is in a gasp of laughter, thinkin' that I've fallen'. The times we really did fall we didn't know anything was wrong until it was all over, it feels just the same when it's a accident as when it's just part of the act, the fallin' I mean.

While mister and I wuz sittin' in the cook house on a Sunday, eatin' our dinner, the side wall wuz up and a lot of people on the outside wuz lookin' in, wonderin' how o eat and what we eat. One man spoke. "Oh, look, they eat with knife and forks." Have you got that? Jest then we ast the man if he would like to come in and have dinner with us and he said, "Why, sure I would. It would be a pleasure to eat with the circus" and that he never et with circus people. And when he came in and sat down and seen what we had to eat and how nice and clean the table wuz set, in the meantime we paying 75 cents 4 a meal for him, the man was so surprised, after he got through dinner he took our address and said, "I'll never forget it the longest day that "he lives and how wonderful circus people live and the cleanness of their camp sites.

The way they have it in the cook house is actors on one side, side show people on the other side, freaks on the other side, cowboys, cowgirls on the other side. Then a partition in between the tents for the working people and they gits the same food as we git.

In the summer we hire a big bus and go out on picnics, swimmin', some golfin', on Sunday. Circus life isn't what people thinks it is. We jest sit around in between shows with our

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knittin' or sewin'. We all make what they call a trousseau box, blouses, underwear. The circus has their own doctors and own chief of police, and pressman and in case of an accident, they have their own "Fixers" like a lawyer. Put down that in my times they didn't have no compensation but all the times I wuz with Ringling they took well care of me. And if I had to pick, I'd take circus any ime, even though the circus pays only 175 and vaudeville 300, 'cause in a circus you get everything for you and when you get your pay it's clear and you kin save somethin'. But in vaudeville, you get, say 300, and you have to pay your room and your meals, and handlin' of baggage, an' checkin' and everything extra like that and you ain't got a thing when you get to pay day. See what I mean?